The United States Advocates Diversity of Methods for Fighting Climate Change

Interview with Senior Climate Negotiator and Special Representative Dr. Harlan L. Watson

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1. Dr. Watson, you head the USG negotiation team which works on climate change issues. What is your role in the formation of USG positions on climate change and global warming – and related measures to cut greenhouse gas emissions?

The State Department has a mandate to represent the United States Government in the international arena. As the head of the U.S. negotiating team for non-Ministerial meetings, I lead the formulation of U.S. government positions on international climate change issues by working closely with the White House and technical U.S. government agencies through the interagency policy process. The State Department, as an international agency, is involved in domestic questions only to the extent that those issues are reflected in international negotiations.

2. Harsh positions of USG vis-a-vis the commitment to reduction of greenhouse gas emissions (especially CO2) are known. The U.S. has persisted on these positions for a number of years. This became particularly evident from the U.S. disagreement with obligations ensuing from the Kyoto protocol. One of U.S. arguments was that correlation between greenhouse gas emissions and global warming had not been absolutely proven. For a while now, the scientists (even American – IPCC) have had no doubts about this correlation. Has the U.S. position on decrease of greenhouse gas emissions also changed because of this?

U.S. climate change policy has been one of constant innovation, action and flexibility. In his first speech on climate change in February 2001 President Bush said "We will act, learn, and act again, adjusting our approaches as science advances and technology evolves." More recently, he said, ""I have said consistently that global warming is a serious problem." He also stated that we ought to get past the debate and "start implementing the technologies necessary to enable us to achieve a couple of big objectives -- one, be good stewards of the environment; two, become less dependent on foreign sources of oil for economic reasons and for national security reasons."

We are doing just that. The United States leads the world in the advancement of climate change science and technology. From 2001-2008, we will have spent nearly $45 billion for climate-related science, technology, observations, international assistance and incentive programs. In addition, $42.5 billion is available for loan guarantees for clean energy technology projects. The U.S. is a world leader in climate science and we are the single largest funder of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). In

addition, the IPCC's most recent findings benefited significantly from research funded by President Bush's climate science program.

Over the last seven years, the climate scientists have answered important questions about the impacts that human activities are having on the climate system. With this improved understanding and certainty, we have increased the intensity of our actions.

In the months ahead, we remain firmly committed to working with our international partners in advancing the United Nations-sponsored climate negotiations, including a serious and detailed contribution to those negotiations through the President's Major Economies Process by this summer.

3. It is a fact that the U.S. contributes 30% of global greenhouse gas emissions, which ranks it the highest (before EU with 27%, China, India, Russia) Is the USG aware of the responsibility -- with regard to its not cutting greenhouse gas emissions -- it bears for future (also American) generations?

First, your figures are not correct. According to the the IPCC's most recent report, 2004 global greenhouse emissions totaled 49.0 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent, of which the United States contributed 7.2 billion tonnes, or less than 15%. In any event, according to many studies, China is now the largest emitter of greenhouse gases, and it is no longer accurate to call the United States the world's largest greenhouse gas emitter.

The point isn't who is the largest emitter, or who is responsible for exactly what. The U.S. recognizes that we all have a common responsibility to address climate change, and we will all need to make appropriate contributions to achieve our common goals. President Bush has stated that the United States is committed to slowing, stopping, and then reversing GHG emissions and, as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has said, climate change has truly global implications for each and every nation.

The international community took a first step in Bali in beginning an important discussion about how to achieve a truly global solution to the climate challenge. This is a new and exciting chapter in climate diplomacy. The United States is committed to working hard over the next two years to ensure that we implement the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change's Bali Action Plan in a way that achieves this end. In this work, we are engaged, serious and pragmatic. We accept the leadership role we know we must play as we all work together to develop and implement practical and effective solutions to the challenges of climate change and energy security.

4. What is, in your opinion, the main difference between American and European approach to combating global warming?

To foster a truly sustainable global approach to climate change, the United States believes that international climate actions must accommodate diverse national circumstances and approaches. Diverse approaches will help us to replicate success as we learn about each others' efforts.

The United States is taking a leadership role in implementing international public-private partnerships, conducting cutting-edge science and technology research and through many other domestic, bilateral, and regional clean development and climate initiatives as part of our approach. We appreciate the cooperation of our European partners in many of these activities, which are yielding tangible results. Unlike many of our European partners, the United States did not ratify the Kyoto Protocol, but we are working with our partners to advance the adoption and deployment of innovative technologies and reach consensus on an environmentally effective, economically sustainable climate agreement under the UNFCCC by 2009.

The United States has been stressing the importance of a diversity of approaches through the Major Economies Process (MEP), which involves representatives from France, Germany, Italy, Russia, the United Kingdom, the EU, and the EC, among others. Through the MEP, these countries are working within the U.N. process to strengthen programs addressing energy efficiency and to advance the global transfer and adoption of clean energy technologies. Progress toward a global emissions reduction goal will be underpinned by midterm national targets and programs. In addition, participants in the MEP will work on sectoral approaches to low-carbon power generation, transportation and land use, as well as on steps to disseminate technologies by creating an international clean energy fund and removing trade barriers.

5. At the December COP13 Bali meetings, scientists presented assessments according to which greenhouse gas emissions will have to be reduced by 50% at the global level by 2050, based on 1990 base year. Developed countries will have to cut their emissions by 85% by 2050 in comparison with 1990. What is the U.S. position on these assessments?

The figures you mention were not presented by scientists, but advocated by some governments. There is a wide range of views among the international community on appropriate aspirational goals for GHG emissions cuts. Last year, G8 members agreed to seriously consider substantial emissions reductions goals by this year, and Major Economies Process participants are currently working toward a long-term global emissions reduction goal that will feed directly into the Bali Action Plan. We remain committed to working through all of these processes to reach agreement on appropriate, effective, and sustainable goals that respect countries' differing national circumstances.

6. The Non-sustainable pattern of industrial development has apparently reached its end. How does the USG understand/define sustainable development?

United States climate policies are part of our broader sustainable development agenda. Countries in the developing world are justifiably focused on economic growth and providing for the health, education and other needs of their citizens. The United States believes that climate policies should recognize and complement these priorities. We have found that if you approach developing countries on what matters to them, which is energy

security, lifting their people out of poverty, and finding ways to clean up their power sources, climate change can be an important component of the conversation.

7. Extensive (non-sustainable) development of less developed countries, especially giants such as China and India, is undoubtedly one of the largest climate change threats in the coming decades. Obviously, no one can prohibit industrial development to these countries. What can be done? According to your opinion, what measures are necessary?

Development and climate protection can be mutually consistent objectives. Too often addressing climate change has been equated with negative economic consequences, but we have found that a bottom-up, sector-based approach has been very successful in the Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate, in which we are seeing significant results due to strong engagement from India and China. Thanks to our work as part of the APP, the United States knows that the acceleration of clean energy use in the international arena is feasible, and that the potential climate and development benefits of such acceleration are considerable.

Our flagship partnership in this field, the APP engages the governments and private sectors of Australia, Canada, China, India, Japan, Korea and the United States to facilitate deployment of, and investment in, clean energy technologies. This innovative public-private partnership is achieving real results through activities in public-private sector task forces in eight energy-intensive sectors — aluminum, buildings and appliances, cement, cleaner fossil energy, coal mining, power generation and transmission, renewable energy and distributed generation, and steel.

For example, the Aluminum Task Force is working to reduce highly potent greenhouse gases, such as perfluorocarbons (PFCs), through sharing best management practices. Participants will work to implement cost-effective, technically-feasible opportunities to optimize anode effects in electrolytic cells, the primary source of PFCs during aluminum production. This is accomplished by providing relevant tools for developing PFC inventories and reporting regimes to facilitate the development and adoption of smelter-specific PFC-emission reduction strategies. This work has the potential to eliminate the equivalent of 15 to 20 million tons of CO_2 per year in China alone — the equivalent of the combined emissions from 20 medium-sized coal power plants.

In addition, the Renewable Energy and Distributed Generation Task Force is leading efforts to tackle the policy and regulatory barriers surrounding clean energy technologies. Focusing on the Indian states of West Bengal, Gujarat and Punjab, the task force is working to support grid interconnection standards and other policy structures critical for growth and replication of innovative energy technologies. The result will be improved awareness at a state and regulatory level of the finance and policy mechanisms that must be in place to support cleaner energy infrastructure.

8. Fossil fuels are a limited energy source and the primary source of greenhouse gas emissions. What is the strategy of the current US Administration pertaining to the use of alternative energy sources? How do you encourage better use thereof? Does the U.S. have a strategy -- like the EU -- which defines the ways and the timeframe for increased utilization of solar, wind and biofuels energy?

The United States remains focused on developing alternative energy sources. As I already mentioned, we provide substantial funding for and lead in the development of advanced technology options that can reduce, avoid, or sequester greenhouse gas emissions. Use of renewable energy is rapidly expanding in the U.S. The U.S. now leads the world in biofuels production — producing over 6 billion gallons annually. In addition, since 2000, wind energy in the U.S. increased by about 500 percent—from about 2.5 GW to about 15 GW by the end of 2007.

Also, in December President Bush signed into law the Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007. This law has a number of mandates for motor vehicles, alternative fuels, lighting, appliances, and buildings which taken together, could reduce projected greenhouse gas emissions by more than six billion metric tons by 2030. The motor vehicle and alternative fuel standards respond to the challenge of the "Twenty in Ten" initiative, which President Bush announced in January 2007, to reduce gasoline use by 20 percent over 10 years. The new law requires fuel producers to use at least 36 billion gallons of biofuel in 2022 and sets a national fuel economy standard of 35 miles per gallon by 2020, which will increase fuel economy standards by 40 percent and save billions of gallons of fuel. The lighting standards will phase out traditional incandescent bulbs by 2012 to 2014, cutting energy use by 30%. For appliances, we have energy efficiency standards for power consuming appliances such as external power supplies, residential boilers, dehumidifiers, electric motors and walk-in coolers among many others.

9. Resolutions adopted, a COP13 (Bali Action Plan) in simple terms determine mandatory and check able measures for mitigation of climate change effects for all countries, less developed and developed. What measures will the U.S. adopt?

December's constructive United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change discussions in Bali marked the beginning of a process toward creating a post-2012 arrangement on climate change. The United States is already engaging enthusiastically and constructively in this important work. We worked tirelessly in Bali with both developed and developing countries to reach consensus and we welcome the resulting roadmap. We view it as a critically important first step in the process of achieving a global, comprehensive and effective approach to climate change.

For the first time in such negotiations, the developing world agreed to consider, in the words of the roadmap, "measurable, reportable and verifiable" actions to mitigate climate change. Overall, the results in Bali were a win, not just for the United States, but for all participants committed to seriously addressing the challenges of climate change.

The United States is already leading by example with ambitious national targets for reducing emissions. We have set mandatory targets in vehicle fuel efficiency and appliance efficiency. Our new Energy Independence and Security Act, which I discussed in some detail in the last question, demonstrates U.S. leadership in setting robust targets and will produce dramatic cuts in greenhouse gas emissions.

10. What is the purpose of your visit to Slovenia?

We came to Slovenia for discussions on the Major Economies Process. Our trip was most productive, and we look forward to continued work with EU members through the Major Economies Process and through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.